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211631Z Nov 03

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 LAGOS 002399

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/14/2008

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SUBJECT: NATIONS WITHIN A NATION: A VISIT TO EDO AND ONDO STATES

Classified By: CONSUL GENERAL ROBYN HINSON-JONES FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AN

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1. (U) Summary. The impact of the ethnic diversity of Nigeria's close to 400 distinct ethnic groups on the country's politics and developing democracy was made clearer in a recent visit to Edo and Ondo States. Ondo State, is older by decades than its neighbor Edo and has regional governing experience. It has gotten off to a good start under a newly elected administration that has plans to significantly increase agricultural production and lure back teachers. By contrast, Edo State is only twelve years old. Although almost 100 per cent ethnic Edo, the new governor's election is still being challenged and he may yet lose his seat. Edo has joined a recently formed group with the other Nigerian ethnic minorities and the group has indicated it will support the presidential aspirations of former military leader, Ibrahim Babangida. Tony Anenih, former Minister, close advisor of President Obasanjo, and prominent son of Edo is still deeply and passionately involved in the State's politics and is maneuvering to get his son into the governor's chair in the 2007 elections. End summary.

Background

2. (U) Although most observers admit that Nigerian politics, tradition, history and culture are dominated by three major ethnic groups, Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo, a recent study concludes that there are at least 389 distinct, indigenous ethnic groups in Nigeria. As the nation moves toward democratic government, these groups are demanding more recognition and more control over their own affairs. In the last elections, the predominantly-Yoruba and southwestern Alliance for Democracy (AD) party made an obvious ethnocentric move and declined to field a candidate against the Yoruba incumbent presidential candidate of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Igbos in the southeast openly demanded that the Presidency should go to an ethnic Igbo. A former Hausa military ruler from the mostly Muslim north publicly and privately urged Muslims to vote Muslim -- which would almost guarantee a Hausa President. Looking to the 2007 elections, a group claiming to represent the other 386 ethnic groups was formed this month in the capital Abuja. The group, the Ethnic Minorities Movement of Nigeria (EMMN), adds another layer of unpredictability to the traditional Nigerian political struggle to form winning alliances among the southeast, southwest and the north, and EMMN has, at least initially, vowed to support a Hausa -- Ibrahim Babangida. Ondo and Edo States are a microcosm of the ethnic diversity that is the problem and promise of Nigeria's past, present and, possibly, its future.

Edo and Ondo

3. (U) Edo and Ondo share a common border and are similar in some ways. They are both southwestern States, with similar topography, bad roads and crumbling infrastructure. Both claim to have the best educated populations with the highest number of PhDs and university professors. Before the development of the oil industry, the economies of both States were based on agriculture and forestry. The differences between the two are, however, more striking. Ondo has been a defined and recognized province, territory or State in Nigeria since 1915. Its population of about 5 million is almost entirely Yoruba. Ondo's southern border is coastline along the Bight of Benin and also includes a small part of a lower corner of the Niger River Delta. This access to the sea allows a small fishing industry to operate, but, unfortunately, Ondo has no on- or off-shore oil. Edo became a State only in 1991. Its approximately 3 million residents are ethnic Edo who trace their roots back many centuries to

the ancient Kingdom of Bini. These people speak the Edo language and do not claim to be a sub-group of any other ethnic group. Edo is poor in resources and landlocked. However, Benin City, where the internationally renowned ancient Benin Bronzes were created, is the capital of Edo and it draws a modest amount of visitors to the State.

New administration in Ondo is off to a fast start

14. (U) PolOffs met with Ondo Speaker of the House of Assembly Victor A. Olabimtan on a one day familiarization visit to the State. Ondo, like four of its neighboring States to the west, abandoned the AD and elected the full slate of PDP candidates, headed by Governor Chief Segun Agagu. Olabimtan was eager to tell us what the new administration had accomplished in less than six months in office. He started his prepared remarks by saying that Ondo is a "peaceful" State with the most highly educated population in the country. "We don't fight; we reason our way to solutions to our problems," he boasted. He said the Agagu administration is concentrating on the revival of the agricultural sector in Ondo, especially the production of cocoa. The State has already hired consultants to study ways to increase rice production that used to be produced in the State in export level quantities. Ondo is also launching several programs to lure people back to the agriculture-based rural towns. Teachers who agree to work in these places will be given "bush bonuses" and even cars; people willing to farm in the areas will receive no-interest, "community-based" loans and equipment. Development of bitumen mining is being pursued as another source of revenue and jobs for the State. The Speaker said that Ondo has the largest deposits of bitumen and that two companies, one Nigerian (Beecon) and the other Canadian (Naisan), have already received approval from the GON to start work.

No more "khaki boys"

15. (U) Turning to politics, Olabimtan thanked the USG for supporting Nigeria and for "helping us to stabilize our democracy." He continued, saying "Democracy has come to stay. We will have no more 'khaki boy' rulers!" He expressed great interest in US visitor exchange programs for legislators and government administrators. However, all is not sweetness and light in Ondo. The State is having some of the same problems as several other States with challenges and protests from the losing parties in the 2003 elections. The Ondo State chapter of the AD, calling the Agagu administration one of "fiction, falsehood and visionless government," has challenged the Governor to tell voters why he has fired 30% of the civil servants appointed by the previous (AD) Governor and why it has not yet paid months of back pay to teachers. Olabimtan said that the new administration had inherited financial and personnel problems from the previous government.

Edo State motto: "The heartbeat of the nation"

16. (U) Benin City, the capital of Edo State, looks no better nor worse than any other major Nigerian city with its bad roads, busy and crowded markets and streets, but it does have an entire street in the heart of the downtown area for makers and sellers of bronze and brass. We met with Dr. Osagie Obayuwana, who is a lawyer and the gubernatorial candidate of the National Conscience Party (NCP) in the 2003 elections, and Esosa Edosomwan, a professor of economics and NCP State Chairman. Obayuwana, who received his law degree from Michigan State, claimed his party was the only credible opposition to the ruling PDP in Edo State. "We are the party of revolutionaries," he declared. He touched on a theme we have heard from political activists in other parts of the south, that Nigeria needs to overhaul its 1999 Constitution by calling a Sovereign National Conference. "Once the people have spoken (by referendum on a new Constitution) we can mobilize and move forward," he said. According to Obayuwana, until the Constitution is amended to conform to the wishes of the people for more control and "true federalism", Nigeria's new democracy is unstable. Edosomwan observed that the NCP was the party of liberals, progressives and welfarists. He said pessimistically, "Most Nigerians are ignorant of how government should work. The NCP wants to energize the people because we can not keep waiting for our so-called leaders to change or to make changes." Edosomwan said the NCP has a political enlightenment and education program that it plans to roll out in all of Nigeria after the new year -- if it can find funding. He said that the Party was already working with some US organizations, notably the US Congressional Black Caucus, and was trying to get more help from Nigerian-Americans and other Nigerians in the diaspora.

17. (U) Edo also has a continuing political imbroglio. Tony Anenih, former Minister of Works and Housing, confidant of President Olusegun Obasanjo and nicknamed "the Fixer" by his political colleagues for his ability to work behind the scenes for Obasanjo, is also the longtime political "godfather" in Edo State. Anenih and Chief Gabriel Igbinedion (father of the second term PDP Governor, Lucky Igbinedion) have been battling for control of politics in Edo since the State was created. Matters heated up in October when the Igbinedion forces in the State Assembly impeached the Speaker of the House, Friday Itulah, one of Anenih's godsons. The media have reported that the fight is about who will be governor of Edo in 2007. Anenih is said to be setting up the machinery and grooming one of his sons to get the position. Igbinedion is said to prefer somebody else -- anybody else -- for the position. Charges of duplicity and allegations of fraud, coercion, and favoritism have been flying among the two sides and various factions of the Edo group since the impeachment, but no one has taken any legal action. The voters of Edo have four years to decide whether Anenih gets to keep his "godfather" title.

Environmental rights are human rights

18. (U) PolOffs had just time in a one day familiarization visit to meet with Godwin Uyi Ojo, Programmes Director for Environmental Rights Action/ Friends of the Earth, Nigeria (ERA). ERA was formed in 1993 as an organization dedicated to the principle that "All people shall have the right to a generally satisfactory environment favorable to their development." The group now has offices in Benin, Bayelsa, Lagos and Port Harcourt. The group is funded by contributions from private citizens in Nigeria and some foreign contributions. It gets no funds from the GON. Ojo is a political ecologist with degrees in environment and development, and social studies from England and the Netherlands. He has a weekly environmental column in the Guardian newspaper and is the author of several books of poetry on the environmental struggle in Nigeria. Ojo said ERA does not support a particular party but would support a party that was effective in furthering the goals of the group. He said the group is not positive on the PDP's grasp of environmental issues and its apparent "military mindset." As an example he cited that President Obasanjo had banned gas flaring in 1979. Nothing was done up until 2002 when he banned it, again. Suddenly, in 2003, all the oil and gas companies announced a 51 per cent reduction in flaring -- without any verifiable data to prove the reduction.

19. (C) ERA currently has a team of international environmental law specialists reviewing Nigeria's environmental laws and drafting a proposed new law that will focus on the human rights issue of a peoples' right to control their natural resources. In addition, they are following closely the development of tin mining in Jos and Edo States so that "Mistakes that were made in the Delta (oil region) will not be made again." Ojo said his organization supports the calls for a Sovereign National Conference because the 1999 Constitution does not protect peoples' right to control their resources. He added that the organization will lobby and press for national legislation that will assure the people are represented in all future environmental projects. Lastly, he told us he was sad to see that the US had given an award to Chevron, a company that, he said, "had hired military gunboats to kill people."

110. (C) Comment. Not much has changed in the southwest since the April and May elections. Even some of the names of the players are the same. It is a hopeful sign, however, that though many thought the last elections were rife with fraud and they are being doggedly challenged in the Elections Tribunals, for the most part Nigeria got through the elections without the violence or military intervention that had marred previous elections, and both winners and losers are actively preparing and positioning for the next round in 2007.

HINSON-JONES